

[Kuchipudi's Houston Hero](#)

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DANCE

Kuchipudi's Houston Hero

Just 17, this high school student excels at his art

Kalyani Giri, Houston

Bharath Soumitri Guntupali, 17, is the first male dancer to graduate from the Anjali Center for Performing Arts in Houston in their 25-year history. He proved a worthy student of his guru, Rathna Kumar, at his "Kuchipudi Rangaprevesam," first solo performance, held at the Lillie and Roy Cullen Theatre in downtown Houston. Kuchipudi, the classical dance style of Andhra Pradesh, was named for the tiny village where it originated. It is believed to be the dance of male brahmin priests during the age of Rig Veda, though most performers today are women. Like other classical dance forms, Kuchipudi is based on the Natya Shastra of Sage Bharatha. Physical endurance, quick handling of rhythmic sequences and descriptive skill are the hallmarks of Bharath's program from the invocatory Trideva Stuti to the vividly vigorous Thillana, all testimony to his years of practice. At the request of Hinduism Today, I interviewed the young dancer. Here are some excerpts.

On God

Every morning, I pray to goddess Saraswati. Hanuman is my Ishtadevata. I am guided by my guru, Sri Vidhyadeeshananda Giri.

On parents

My mother has taught me, more than anything else, the value of hard work. My father is extremely well read and from him I've learned the value of an open mind. His constant discussions with me on all areas of life, from politics to philosophy, have taught me the importance of constant learning.

On career

There are so many things in life that interest me, ranging from law and philosophy to science and politics. Right now, I am just focusing on getting through high school.

On dancing

I hope to continue dancing. I have made a great emotional investment in learning this very classical dance form. While dancing Ananda Tandavam, I felt the ecstasy of the rhythm and was completely lost in the purity of music and exuberance of movement. It was, for me, a spiritual experience.

On Hinduism

I think the role of Hinduism in the conflict among religions is not to become an arbiter between warring religions, but to change Hindu society to serve as an example to the rest of the world. When Hindus abandon caste and linguistic prejudices, artificial creations of society, then, and only then, will Hinduism be able to effectively impact the world of religious discord.

On nonviolence

I don't believe that any religion is uniquely violent. All religions would advocate peace and harmony before war. But I do believe that Hinduism uniquely prevents a more subtle form of violence that ravages most societies—the violence of conversion. Hinduism rejects conversion and rejects demagoguery as violence, and instead proclaims that a person find his own truth, rather than be inspired by the fear of outsiders.

On corporal punishment

Beating a child into submission only spreads the idea that force, not example, determines action.

On vegetarianism

I come from a family of vegetarians. They are vegetarians because of their outlook on life—not because of any religious restrictions. I am also a vegetarian by choice. I do not think that nourishment of my body should be at the expense of the suffering of another living being.

On his generation

I would tell everyone in my generation to be proud of who they are and the rich cultural heritage and religion they represent. I think growing up in a Hindu household provides you with an open mind. You learn that all paths to truth are equal, but that you can always be proud to be a member of the world's oldest culture and religion.

On dance and world peace

Kuchipudi as an art form could very much be a tool of world peace. Television and the printed word can be very politicized and profit-motivated forms of mass media. Dance can offer an even more potent social commentary than the mass media, because it comes from the heart and expresses very basic, universal human values which anyone, no matter where they come from, can understand and respect.

On the perfect world

It is one where fanaticism doesn't dictate how people act. In

light of the horrific tragedy of September 11, I think the world will turn away from the views of demagogues and start to look within themselves for the truth. I think the biggest problem in the world today is an adherence to hatred, as opposed to living simply in faith and humanity.

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